



A MESSAGE FROM SDVSOA CHAIRMAN RICHARD

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VA Town Hall Meeting in Watertown

I was one of about 30-40 veterans in attendance at last week's Town Hall Meeting in Watertown. Present were the Director of the VASFHC System, Darwin Goodspeed and James Brubaker, Director of the Dakota's Regional VA Offices. Mr. Brubaker supervisors both the RO in Sioux Falls and Fargo which has 60 personnel in Sioux Falls, and 50 in Fargo of which about two-thirds are veterans.

They both had brief opening statements, but were there to "listen to veteran concerns". Mr. Brubaker spoke of the upcoming standardized form for veterans wanting to file an informal claim. This will be part of our Mini-Conferences coming up in May. I hope I have these figures right, but I believe he said there are almost 15,000 veterans in South Dakota receiving \$15 million in Compensation and Pension Benefits and this includes 1,300 women veterans.

Mr. Goodspeed addressed first the Choice Program and the problems with 'rolling it out' and there have been problems. One of the issues is the prior approved providers and how they become part of the program. According to Mr. Goodspeed, only 200 South Dakotans have called the Choice Program 800 # and just a few have actually used the program. He did mention that often a veteran, working within the SFVAHC System, can see a particular specialist outside the system more quickly and with much less cost if they stay and work with the VA referral process. A veteran in the audience did mention the frustration with attempting to utilize the Choice Program and felt this may be one of the important reasons it, so far, has been less than successful.

Older veterans with Hepatitis C are a current high priority within the VA. Letters are being sent out wanting these veterans who contacted the disease years ago to come back in for an evaluation and, possibly, receive a new drug that "promises a cure". Another revisiting being done by the VA is the Means Test. Here, too, veterans who may not have qualified years ago, because of net worth, my now qualify. These persons may as well be getting letters from the VA encouraging them to reapply.

This summer the VA in Sioux Falls will be opening up a brand new Women's Health Clinic, four new Operating Rooms and a doubling of beds in the "acute ward". Goodspeed went on to tell of next year's construction at the SFVA will increase to 15,000 square feet the capacity of the hospital. When asked about the CBOC's he mentioned the Sioux City CBOC being of a high priority for increasing service. That very day a new full time Optometrist was hired for the Watertown CBOC and they are interviewing in Aberdeen for a new Optometrist as well.

Both directors expressed appreciation for the attendance of the veterans. Both brought along members of their staffs who were able to answer specific questions veterans may have had. They anticipate having more Town Hall meetings in other towns in South Dakota.